

## POISON by Roald Dahl

It must have been around midnight when I drove home. Coming up the drive I noticed Harry's light was still on, so he was awake anyway. I parked the car and went up to the balcony and went across to the door of Harry's room, opened it quietly, and looked in. He was lying on the bed and I could see he was awake. But he didn't move. He didn't even turn his head towards me, but I heard him say, 'Timber, Timber, come here.' He spoke slowly, whispering each word carefully. 'Stop. Wait a moment, Timber.' I could hardly hear what he was saying. 'What's the matter, Harry?' 'Sshhh!' he whispered. 'Sshhh! For God's sake don't make a noise. Take your shoes off before you come nearer, Please do as I say, Timber.' I couldn't understand about taking off the shoes but I went down and removed the shoes and left them in the middle of the floor. Then I went over to his bed.

'Don't touch the bed! For God's sake don't touch the bed!' He was wearing a pair of pyjamas with blue, brown, and white stripes, and he was sweating terribly. It was a hot night and I was sweating a little myself, but not like Harry. His whole face was wet and the pillow around his head was sodden with moisture.

'What is it, Harry?' 'A krait,' he said. 'A krait! Oh, my God! Where'd it bite you? How long ago?' We've got to be quick. Come on now, quickly, tell me where it bit you.'

'I haven't been bitten,' he whispered, 'Not yet. It's on my stomach. Lying there asleep.'

'You don't really mean there's a krait lying on your stomach now?' 'How did it get there?'

'I was reading lying on my back and I felt something on my chest. Soft of tickling. Then out of the corner of my eye saw this little krait sliding over my pyjamas. Small, about ten inches. I knew mustn't move'.

Harry paused and was silent for a few moments. 'See it, it's still there. I could feel it through my pyjamas, moving on my stomach. Then it stopped moving and now it's lying there in the warmth. Probably asleep. I've been waiting for you.'

'How long ago?'

'Hours,' he whispered. 'Hours and bloody hours and hours'. There was not much doubt about the truth of Harry's story.

As a matter of fact it wasn't a surprising thing for a krait to do. They hang around people's houses and they go for the warm places. The surprising thing was that Harry hadn't been bitten. 'All right, Harry' I said and don't move and don't talk any more unless you have to. I went softly out of the

room in my stocking feet and fetched a small sharp knife from the kitchen. I was going to be ready to cut the bitten place and try to suck the venom out. 'Harry,' I said, 'I think the best thing to do is to have a look first.'

'Don't be a damn fool.'

'Why not?'

'The light would frighten him. It's dark under there now.'

'Why don't you get a doctor?' Harry said.

'A doctor. Of course. That's it. I'll get Ganderbai.' I tiptoed out to the hall, looked up Ganderbai's number in the book, lifted the phone and told the operator to hurry.

'Dr Ganderbai,' I said. 'This is Timber Woods.'

'Hello, Mr Woods. You not in bed yet?' 'Look, could you come round at once? And bring serum for a krait bite.' 'Who's been bitten?' 'No one. No one yet. But Harry Pope's in bed and he's got one lying on his stomach - asleep under the sheet on his stomach.'

Ganderbai said, 'Tell him to keep quite still. He is not to move or to talk. Do you understand? I'll come at once!'

I went back to the bedroom. Harry's eyes watched me as I walked across to his bed. 'Ganderbai's coming. He said for you to lie still.' 'What in God's name does he think I'm doing!' I took out my handkerchief and very gently I wiped the sweat off his face and neck.

The beam of a headlamp shone through the window as Ganderbai's car swung around to the front of the bungalow I went out to meet him. 'How is it?' Ganderbai asked. 'Where is he? Which room?' He followed me into Harry's room. He was wearing soft-soled bedroom slippers and he walked across the floor noiselessly, like a careful cat. Harry watched him out of the sides of his eyes.

'First thing is to try to get some serum into him', he said and he opened his bag and started to make preparations. 'Intravenously. But I must do it neatly'. Harry's eyes were bright now and wide open. Ganderbai rolled up the pyjama sleeve to the elbow without moving the arm.

He whispered, 'I'm going to give you an injection. Serum. Just a prick but try not to move. Don't tighten your stomach muscles.' Harry looked at the syringe.

He looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes and opened them again, but he didn't move. When it was finished Ganderbai leaned forward putting his mouth close to Harry's ear. 'Now you'll be all right even if you are bitten. But don't move. I'll be back in a moment.' He picked up his bag and went out

to the hall and I followed, 'Is he safe now?' I asked.

'No.' The little Indian doctor stood there in the hall rubbing his lower lip.

'It must give some protection, mustn't it? Isn't the serum very good?' I asked.

'Unfortunately not,' he answered. 'It might save him. It might not. I am trying to think of something else to do.' 'Shall we draw the sheet back quick and brush it off before it has time to strike?' 'Never! We are not entitled to take a risk.'

Then we must administer an anaesthetic to the creature where it lies. It is not safe; he continued, 'because a snake is cold-blooded and anaesthetic does not work so well or so quick with such animals, but it is better than any other thing to do. We could use either... chloroform...'

That is best. 'Now quick!' Take the bottle of chloroform from my bag. It has an orange label and the name is printed on it.

'You got it?' Ganderbai said. 'Good, good. I just been telling him what we are going to do. He went back to the bedroom and I followed, carrying the bottle carefully with both hands. Harry was lying on the bed in precisely the same position as before. I raised my thumb, giving him the okay signal.'

Ganderbai used a hollow rubber tube and he'd got a small paper funnel fitted into one end of the tube. He began to pull a little piece of the sheet out from under the mattress. Finally he took the rubber tube and inserted one end of it in the opening so that it would slide under the sheet along the mattress towards Harry's body. Ganderbai himself was sweating now.

Without looking up, he held out a hand to me for the chloroform. "Tell him I'm going to soak the mattress and that it will be very cold under his body" he said to me. I bent over Harry and passed on the message.

'Oh, God Almighty, get on, get on!' For the first time he raised his voice, and Ganderbai glanced up sharply then went back to his business. Ganderbai poured a few drops of chloroform into the paper funnel and waited while it ran down the tube. Then he poured some more. I could see the heavy vapour of the chloroform swirling slowly like smoke above the paper funnel. Ganderbai turned and whispered to me: 'We'll give it fifteen minutes just to be safe.' I leaned over to tell Harry. 'We're going to give it fifteen minutes, just to be safe.'

Then we stood and waited beside the bed, The little Indian was concentrating all his will power on keeping Harry quiet.

The smell of chloroform was oppressive and it made me feel sick.

Ganderbai turned and nodded and I knew he was ready to proceed. 'You go over to the other side of the bed,' he said. 'We will each take one side of the sheet and draw it back together, but very slowly, please, and very quietly.' The smell of chloroform was awful. I remember trying to hold my breath and when I couldn't do that any longer I tried to breathe shallow so the stuff wouldn't get into my lungs.

The whole of Harry's chest was visible now, or rather the striped pyjama top which covered it, and then I saw the white cord of his pyjama trousers, neatly tied in a bow. A little farther and I saw a button. Apart from the button there was nothing on his stomach.

We pulled the sheet back faster then, and when we had uncovered his legs and feet we let the sheet drop over the end of the bed on to the floor.

'Don't move,' Ganderbai said, 'don't move, Mr Pope'. 'It may be anywhere. It could be up the leg of his pyjamas.' When Ganderbai said this, Harry quickly raised his head from the pillow and looked down at his legs. It was the first time he had moved. Then suddenly he jumped up, he was standing on and shouted, 'It's not there!' Ganderbai looked at the mattress; then he looked up at Harry. Harry was all right. He hadn't been bitten and now he wasn't going to get bitten and he wasn't going to be killed and everything was fine, but that didn't seem to make anyone feel any better.

'Mr Pope, you are of course quite sure you saw it in the first place?' 'You don't think you might possibly have been dreaming, do you, Mr Pope?' 'Are you telling me I'm a liar?' he shouted. 'Why, you dirty little Hindu sewer rat!',

'Shut up, Harry!' I said'. 'You dirty black-' 'Harry!' I called. 'Shut up, Harry!' It was terrible, the things he was saying.

Ganderbai went out of the room and I followed him and put my arm around his shoulder. 'Don 't you listen to Harry,' I said. 'This thing's made him so he doesn't know what he's saying.' We went down the steps from the balcony to his old Morris car. He opened the door and got in.

'You did a wonderful job,' I said. 'Thank you so very much for coming.'

'All he needs is a good holiday,' he said quietly, without looking at me, then he started the engine and drove off.